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11. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for August 11-14, 2008, that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

-- September 6 Deadline for Poll Schedules
-- Congress Dilemma in Jharkhand
-- No Change in Uttarakhand Leadership
-- Women Turn Career Soldiers
-- "Give Gays a Break," Says Health Minister Ramadoss

September 6 Deadline for Poll Schedules

12. (U) The Election Commission (EC) will announce the precise schedule for Assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Mizoram by September 6. The EC on August 11 delayed the decision on Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections citing central government concerns about the deteriorating law and order situation. The EC continues to work closely with Jammu and Kashmir state government officials, the Home Ministry and the Intelligence Bureau to assess the political and security environment. General consensus was that Jammu and Kashmir would go to polls in October and the other states in November. With the current unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, the GOI may be forced to postpone elections. For the other states, the expectation is still for November polls.

Congress Dilemma in Jharkhand

13. (SBU) Former Congress Party M.P. and political advisor to the Gandhi family N.D. Patodia told us on August 14 that political infighting in Jharkhand presents serious challenges for the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ahead of national elections next year. According to Patodia, the Jharkhand Mukti Marcha (JMM) chief Shibu Soren faces local resistance from independents and other party factions that oppose JMM's demands for additional state and national level positions (reflets). Moreover, the UPA would have to remove a Congress Party person from power in order to accommodate an

additional JMM cabinet member which would anger the political base, Patodia said. The UPA faces a tricky political challenge in satisfying both JMM and independent camps, while retaining its slender majority (reflets). One school of thought is that the independents will be compelled to fall in line if UPA leadership decides to replace Koda with Soren as Chief Minister.

No Change in Uttarakhand Leadership

¶4. (U) In a bid to keep controversy at bay ahead of Panchayat (local) and national elections, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership on August 11 ruled out change of leadership in Uttarakhand. 25 out of 36 BJP MLAs, with the support of seven state ministers, met BJP President Rajnath Singh August 10 urging the removal of Uttarakhand Chief Minister B.C. Khanduri. The dissidents, led by former Chief Minister Bhagat Singh Koshyari, complained of CM Khanduri's "autocratic" leadership that excluded MLAs and senior leadership from government decisions. They warned that the "power vacuum" would negatively affect the BJP in upcoming Panchayat elections next month and national elections due by May 2009.

¶5. (U) Following two days of heated negotiations, state BJP president Bachi Singh Rawat on August 11 told reporters that the party should focus on elections, not political in-fighting, and urged Koshyari and Khanduri to sort out differences. The Khanduri-Koshyari rivalry is long-standing

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and well-known. Each aspires to be the Chief Minister.

Women Turn Career Soldiers

¶6. (U) On August 11, the Indian armed forces' Chief of Staff Committee broke an age-old tradition when it announced that women will be eligible for permanent commission. Previously, the tenure for servicewomen was limited from five to 14 years, excluding the Army Medical Corps. This historic development resulted from two years of behind-the-scenes consensus-building and negotiations, thanks in large part to Defense Minister A.K. Antony, who has argued that the military should increase the participation of women in the forces to 20 percent. Moving forward, the military must fine-tune the details and identify positions for women officers, who currently comprise only 2.7 percent of the armed forces and are not allowed to serve in combat. Permanent commission will allow women greater access to promotion opportunities and increased responsibilities not possible during a limited tenure. Additionally, the National Defense Academy (NDA) and similar training institutions will open their doors to women, providing the opportunity to earn a degree, as well as to become a commissioned officer. Ranjana Kumari, a noted women's rights activist, welcomed the announcement; however, she argued the military should go a step further, "(women) should be treated as equals and should be included in combat positions."

¶7. (U) Fifteen years after being first allowed into the armed services, women finally have the opportunity to pursue a career as permanent commissioned officers in the traditionally male-dominated military. The recent trend of women officers quitting the military in favor of private sector careers with more promotion potential likely contributed to the decision.

"Give Gays a Break," Says Health Minister Ramadoss

¶8. (U) Speaking at the 17th International Conference on AIDS in Mexico City on August 8, Union Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss advocated legalizing homosexuality in India. Ramadoss asserted, "Section 377 of the Indian Penal

Code (IPC), which criminalizes men who have sex with men, must go." He warned, "structural discrimination against those who are vulnerable to HIV, such as sex workers and men who have sex with men, must be removed if our prevention, care, and treatment programs are to succeed." In a conversation with POL FSN, Shivangi Rai, a lawyer with the HIV Section of the Lawyers Collective, confirmed that the Health Ministry has consistently supported disposing of Article 377 as it impeded efforts to reduce the prevalence of HIV in India. Ramadoss will face opposition from the Ministry of Home Affairs, which argues that abolishing Section 377 would somehow weaken Indian culture and morality.

The Delhi High Court has asked the Central Government to issue a decision on Section 377 by September 8.

¶9. (U) Minister Ramadoss' statement, the first at such a high level forum, was a huge victory for India's gay community. While legal hurdles remain, Ramadoss successfully focused the world's attention on the GOI's handling of gay rights.

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